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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000694

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DASHNAKS RALLY AGAINST CLOSER TURKISH TIES AND TO SHOW
SUPPORT FOR THE ARMENIANS OF JAVAKHETI AND KARABAKH

REF: YEREVAN 681

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) During its September 2 rally for "Artsakh Freedom Day," (Artsakh is the Armenian term for Nagorno-Karabakh) Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), the ultranationalist junior partner in the ruling coalition, previewed its plans to protest the upcoming historic visit of Turkish President Gul (reftel), renewed its call for an autonomous Javakh in a future Georgian "confederation," and repeated a demand that the GOAM recognize an independent Nagorno-Karabakh in the face of continued Azerbaijani war-mongering. The mood of the crowd was relatively unenthusiastic, and many participants were more interested in the concert that followed the rally. While the Dashnaks are still members of the government, their representation of only six percent of the electorate means that while their extreme views on Armenia's foreign relations have some impact, they are not decisive. END SUMMARY.

ARMENIAN - TURKISH RELATIONS

2. (SBU) Officially dedicated to the 17th anniversary of Nagorno-Karabakh's declaration of independence from Azerbaijan, the Dashnaktsutyun rally in the center of Yerevan saw the convergence of no more than five or six thousand supporters, who heard speeches mostly about Turkish-Armenian relations and the plight of ethnic Armenians in neighboring Georgia. The main Dashnak message was that Turkish-Armenian relations should not be normalized until Ankara recognizes the 1915 massacres and forced deportations of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as genocide. Dashnak leaders reaffirmed their plans to organize street protests--"beginning from Zvartnots Airport"--against Turkish President Gul's expected arrival in Yerevan for the September 6 World Cup qualifying match between Armenia and Turkey. Most speakers mentioned that the protests would be "peaceful and civilized," while urging supporters not to cause or yield to any "provocations." During a post-rally conversation with Poloffs, Dashnak MP Lilit Galstian assured that although there would be a demonstration at the stadium, it would only be sports-related to support the Armenian team rather than protest against Turkey. She also ruled out the possibility of uncontrolled clashes, noting that few Turkish fans are expected at the match.

3. (U) At a press conference on September 4, Dashnak spokesman Armen Rustamian announced the party's specific protest plans, starting from President Gul's arrival at the airport. Before the beginning of the football match, they plan to place flowers and light torches at the Genocide memorial, which is within view of the stadium. During

the match, according to Rustamian, Dashnak supporters will yell "patriotic slogans" calling for genocide recognition. He was eager to point out that they would not aim these the actions at President Gul but at "Turkey's positions." Rustamian also warned that the party would regard any other forms of protest as the actions of provocateurs and would work to stop them.

AUTONOMY FOR ARMENIANS OF JAVAKH

¶4. (SBU) The head of the Dashnaktsutyun parliamentary faction, Vahan Hovannisian, spent much of his speech making a case for Georgia's transformation into a "confederation" in which the Armenian-populated Javakheti region would have a high degree of autonomy. Hovannisian claimed that giving Javakheti the status of an autonomous region would discourage other ethnic minorities from seceding from a fractious Georgia. He also claimed that Georgia has continued to pressure Armenians in Javakheti, for instance, by shutting down newspapers and radio stations and not registering NGOs. Several times during his speech he and rally participants chanted, "Javakh! We are with you!"

Recognize Independent KARABAKH

¶5. (SBU) On Karabakh, the Dashnaks called on Azerbaijan to sign a document with Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh "Republic" (NKR) to prevent the possibility of using military force to settle the conflict. Referring to Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, speakers pointed to the international community's double standards regarding different territorial and ethnic disputes. Dashnaktsutyun also urged the Armenian authorities to recognize the NKR officially if

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Azerbaijan were to continue its military threats.

UNENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT

¶6. (SBU) Most of participants in the rally were from outside of Yerevan, and many of them, in interviews with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, insisted that they did not come voluntarily. Participants stood in groups talking amongst themselves rather than listening to the speakers. Mostly a young crowd, the participants seemed to be eager for the speeches to end so that the rock concert that was to follow could begin.

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) While the Dashnaks attempted to rally their supporters against improved ties with Turkey and for the Armenians of Javakh and Karabakh, it appeared that relatively few were really listening. With the support of only six percent of the population (based on the last presidential election), the Dashnaks represent the extreme fringe of the Armenian political debate that often puts nationalism ahead of pragmatism and prosperity. Given their continued participation in the governing coalition and, more importantly, their deep ties to the Diaspora, Dashnak views are not inconsequential. In the current political environment, however, they are also not decisive.

PENNINGTON